

## A BUMPY ROAD THROUGH THE PAST: REVEALING THE UPS AND DOWNS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE DURING JIM CROW

On a sunny August day in 1950, a newspaper photographer captured the smiles of young African American women posing on a beach south of Wilmington.<sup>1</sup> Nat King Cole's "Mona



"Seabreeze Resort" - *The Carolinian*, August 12, 1950

Lisa" was the number one song in the country through most of that summer month and likely could be heard at the beach and on the radios of cars driving along North Carolina's roadways. Moving inland, in 1942 Black soldiers in Fayetteville braved late night roads to save residents from flood waters and were heralded for their efforts. To unwind they might have enjoyed music in downtown taverns from famous artists

staying at the Bedford Inn, like Ella Fitzgerald who entertained with her popular "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" and "If You Can't Sing It, You'll Have to Swing It." If you passed Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium the night of April 13, 1956 you may have seen Black folks decked out in their finest to see crooner Nat King Cole. Further west in the state, cars swinging by Winston-Salem Teaching College for Nursing in November 1962 likely heard the Rams marching band and may have glimpsed Gail Caesar receiving her "Miss Teaching College" crown, surrounded by her court. *The News Argus* lists Mary Wells' "You Beat Me to the Punch" and James Brown's "Three Hearts in a Tangle" as campus favorites that year.<sup>2</sup> Taking a ride through North Carolina during Jim Crow, the sights and sounds of people, buildings and signs passing the car window only offer a glimpse into the lives and experiences of African Americans during legalized segregation in our state. Take a closer look.

“Colored patrons” at Memorial Auditorium in Raleigh had to order separate tickets to see Nat King Cole, banned from sitting with whites. The African American soldiers, who saved local flood victims and served their country, stood on segregated railroad platforms to board second class railcars. The image of young ladies smiling on the beach near Wilmington, which appeared August 12, 1950 in *The Carolinian*, does not reveal the Jim Crow laws that prohibited African Americans from the majority of beaches on the state’s coast. Nor do the smiles hint at the concerns the ladies might have held as they rode or walked through segregated Carolina Beach, at one time, the only roadway in or out of Seabreeze Beach, known as the “Negro” beach. Those college students in Winston-Salem and Greensboro had more in mind than homecoming,



MISS TC AND COURT—Miss Gail Caesar (right) stands with her court (left to right) Mary McCoy, Mary Barnes, and Ruby Bolden

Winston-Salem, *The News Argus*, Dec. 1, 1962 | Greensboro, *The Greensboro News and Record*, Feb. 1, 1960

and they surely caught the attention of motorists and passersby when they staged peaceful sit-ins. The commotion near 134 South Elm Street in Greensboro on February 1, 1960—that would have been North Carolina A&T students launching a sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter, where they were not allowed to sit because of their skin color. Rubberneckers traveling on Hay Street in Fayetteville on February 10, 1960 would not have missed 40 students from Fayetteville Teaching College heading two or three at a time into that city’s Woolworth Drug Store.<sup>3</sup> Slow down, and look again. When passing through these cities and times, the unaware observer may not have

noticed *The Negro Motorist Green Book* on an African American car dash or front seat, with its list of hotels, tourist homes, restaurants and other facilities offering safety, services and accommodations to African Americans. Then again, the publication, which guided Black travelers to businesses where they were welcomed, might be tucked away in the glove compartment of a passing car taking a Black family to church or to visit relatives.

### **Preparing for this Bumpy Ride through History**

*“There were certain places that we couldn’t go.”*

In the Jim Crow South, a stop at the wrong place could lead to Black parents being humiliated or even physically harmed in front of their children. Sidney Jones’ family often traveled from Philadelphia to North Carolina to visit relatives in Johnston County. As a child he did not fully understand the discrimination or the dangers from which his parents tried to shield him during those drives in North Carolina. “I found out later on there were certain places we couldn’t stop when we needed to eat, or use the restroom, or whatever. ‘Nah, we’ll go down here a little further.’ I had no idea why. I figured maybe they just knew a better place to go, but later on I found out there were certain places that we couldn’t go.”<sup>4</sup> A passing motorist would not be aware of the many ways African American parents navigated their children through Jim Crow, an era which began almost immediately after the federal government abandoned enforcement of Reconstruction. The equal protection guaranteed to African Americans by the Fourteenth Amendment all but disappeared, and Southern states legitimized disenfranchisement and discrimination with the creation and enforcement of Jim Crow segregation laws.<sup>5</sup> *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 cemented the law of “separate but equal” and the practice of Jim Crow. A trip down Jim Crow’s byways, demonstrates separate was hardly equal. The resulting inequities were intentional, and African Americans recognized and resisted Jim Crow for what it was, as

historian Blair Kelley explains in *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy V. Ferguson*. “Segregation laws resonated with the dehumanization of slavery,” wrote Kelley. “Southern blacks remembered that bondage robbed their forebears of not only their labor but also their mobility, self-determination, and personal dignity.”<sup>6</sup> African American families found ways to move forward. Roads in the past reveal a historic journey in North Carolina.

The car, taking us back in time, with images moving past our windows, might pass famous entertainers like Cab Calloway heading to Raleigh, Durham, and Charlotte to perform, college students in route to historically black campuses across the state, families traveling from out of state to the famous Chavis Park in Raleigh, and African American laborers walking to work in rural areas. Those same roads provide other vivid and sober images, like the Klu Klux Klan billboard along the highway shoulder in Johnston County. No matter how quickly cars passed the sign, it would be hard for motorists to forget the image or its meaning. Sidney Jones has not forgotten the billboard or its implications during his childhood visits to Johnston County. “You pretty much did not do a lot of venturing out because see, Johnston County is known for certain people that didn’t like certain people,” explained Jones. “Matter of fact, up until a few years ago, even when we would come down and visit, they had a big sign that used to say, ‘Welcome to Klan Country.’ Yeah. Up until like the 80s.”

Discrimination was spelled out in other ways along the roads. “Whites Only” signs expressed a particular brand of inhospitality codified by law, shown from restaurant and hotel windows, in town after town. These are the mingled images travelers encountered along North Carolina’s roadways and in her towns and cities during the Jim Crow era. Whether traveling to work, school, worship, or play, African Americans carved out lives of meaning for themselves

and their families, while facing the degradations and dangers of Jim Crow at every bend in the road.

### **On the Coast**

*“They didn’t want to be harassed trying to get down to the beach.”*

Swing music from juke joints greeted motorists who drove into the oceanside resort of Seabreeze, North Carolina, in early August 1950. A young African American woman from western North Carolina posed for the Wilmington Journal photographer, then rushed into the ocean waves before the photographer could record her name.<sup>7</sup> That same week on the shore, children in a Sunday School group from Wilmington’s Gregory Congregational Church played in the sand and water during their annual beach outing. Clad in bathing suits, Gloria Freeman, Olivia Campbell, Helen Larkins, and Arlethia Williams also smiled for the beach day photographs which appeared August 12, 1950 in *The Carolinian*, an African American newspaper published in Raleigh. While the other three ladies hailed from New Hanover County, Williams traveled from Watha, in nearby Pender County. As one of the few beaches where the state allowed African Americans, travelers came from neighboring towns and afar, encountering segregation on long routes and short drives. Some of the beach goers that day hailed from western North Carolina. Unless they stayed with local relatives, booked a room at a Seabreeze hotel, or made the visit a day trip, they could have turned to the *Green Book* for a list of tourist homes and hotels for safe boarding. The Murphy Hotel on Castle Street and Payne’s Tourist Home are among the places they may have chosen.<sup>8</sup> If the ladies, so beautifully captured in the newspaper, wanted to have their hairdos restored after swimming in the ocean, *The Green Book* listed no less than 18 African American beauty salons, many of them located on Red Cross Street, 7<sup>th</sup> and Nixon Streets. The sunny mood captured in the newspaper article hides any fears

Black beach goers may have had during their short drive through segregated Carolina Beach, the only way to reach the music, dancing, fried seafood, and safety of Seabreeze. Some of the beach goers caught buses to Carolina Beach where the line ended and left them walking the remainder of the route to Seabreeze, a dangerous undertaking according to one Wilmington resident. “To go to Carolina Beach, ride on bus and then have to walk,” recalled Wilmington native James Lofton. “You really got harassed if you had to walk down there. It’s better to go over by car, which most people did. They didn’t want to be harassed trying to get down to the beach. The train, the bus, and the car was pretty much it as far as transportation. Would ride the train to Columbus County to Lake Waccamaw for Blacks.”<sup>9</sup> Even at locations set aside for Blacks in the segregated South, threats existed. Down the road in neighboring South Carolina, less than a month after the Sunday School outing photographed at Seabreeze, KKK members paraded through Atlantic Beach, a Black coastal resort in the Myrtle Beach area, firing shots into the air, according to *The Carolinian*.<sup>10</sup> The incident was a sober reminder of Jim Crow’s stronghold in legal norms and social behaviors of intimidation and violence.

If walking posed a danger, a taxi ride might be an option for getting to the beach and other local sojourns. Dr. James Gray operated the Greyhound Taxi Service in Wilmington. Motorists driving through the port city might have seen his cab with the Greyhound name on the side, or if you drove through the Grays’ neighborhood, a look out the car window might have allowed a glimpse of his two young daughters standing or playing on a neatly kept sidewalk with their father’s taxi parked behind them. At least five other taxi services provided rides to African Americans in the area in 1950, including Star, Mack’s, Tom’s, Dixie, and Crosby’s.<sup>11</sup> The Grays’ popular night club, the Del Morocco, also offered entertainment to audiences, including African American troops during World War II. Driving by the Del Morocco on the right evening, you

would have heard Duke Ellington and his band, playing live. The club drew world class entertainers according to Antoinette Tonye Gray. “From what I remember, the stories my mother shared, it was a jumping place,” remembers Gray. “This was the Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington era. So, they would have these fantastic jazz groups coming through. And I didn’t ask her, and I wish I would have, how it was that these fabulous musicians ended up coming through Wilmington, but they did.”<sup>12</sup> The Chitlin’ Circuit in the South, drew the entertainers to North Carolina, but once they arrived the law banned them from staying in the same hotels as whites. Their audiences had to be separated too, enjoying the show at different times or in different sections of a venue. The artists added to the nation’s culture even as laws and practices denigrated African American intellect, talent, and culture. Wilmington’s Black tourist homes and hotels opened their doors to these stars.

### **In the Sandhills and Rural Towns**

*“We had to bite the bullet again.”*

Along stretches of roads with tobacco and cotton fields bounded by tall pines, some motorists passing through North Carolina’s Sandhills region witnessed African American soldiers training at Fort Bragg. On the night of August 11, 1942, the Fayetteville Police Department called on members of the Military Police with the 578<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment for help during a severe storm. The African American regiment rescued scores of residents living near Fayetteville State Teachers College (now Fayetteville State University). According to *The Black Panther* newspaper, written by and for the men of the 578<sup>th</sup> during WWII, the city mayor and police chief thanked the regiment for their actions.<sup>13</sup> Still, Jim Crow laws relegated these heroes to second class travel. Regardless of their ability to pay for first class tickets, their stature in U.S. military uniforms, or service to their nation, segregation placed these troops in often





“We were coming back. We were doing good. White and black coming out of North Carolina. As soon as we got to Washington, those guys split and didn’t say a thing. As soon as we had to go back to the meal car. We were right back there stuck. We didn’t even have hot food. They had a dining car. They had a bartender and everything. We didn’t have that kind of service in the ‘Black car,’ what we called it. We had to bite the bullet again.”<sup>16</sup>

For the African American soldiers at Fort Bragg in the 1940s, they sought solidarity in the community around them. The Bennett College Choir performed for the 578<sup>th</sup> Battalion and other Fort Bragg soldiers on Sunday, March 6, 1943. “It is our great desire to have the choir come to us again in the near future,” the soldiers wrote.<sup>17</sup> If African American soldiers in the Fort Bragg area, had passes for a night in town, they could dance to swing music or watch the very best in live performances in Fayetteville. At the Bedford Inn, operated by Ocia Smith and listed as a tavern in the 1941 Green Book, entertainers found refuge and down-home meals. Smith’s granddaughter Deborah Harris recalls “Ma Ocia” and the excitement surrounding the Bedford Inn.

“Ma Ocia’s house was here and the Bedford Inn was here. Mama and them used to tell us people like Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, a lot of bands, a lot of bands, used to come, and the soldiers when they came home from war. And Mama said Ma Ocia would cook for the guests and Granddaddy John did all the rest. She says she remembers Dizzy Gillespie’s jaws. Mama said he had the biggest cheeks. Mama said if they had a full house, they would sometimes move people over there, in the big house too. If Ella Fitzgerald and the men came, she would house Ella Fitzgerald in the main house.”<sup>18</sup>

On post, Black soldiers also prided themselves on learning and knowing their own history. *The Black Panther* applauded Cpl. Leonard Holmes for his summary of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* during their book forum and discussion at the Seabrook Road USO on a Wednesday evening in August 1942.<sup>19</sup> Soldiers from the 578<sup>th</sup> played in a basketball invitational hosted by Fayetteville State Teachers College. The African American community embraced the soldiers and closed ranks around them.

Further away from larger populations, African American travelers never knew what they might face. In addition to harm, humiliation was a constant product of Jim Crow and its maintenance of white supremacy. Sidney Jones describes his family's experience with degradation on the road when he was a young boy.

We were actually, I think we had just come through Virginia, coming into North Carolina. It was early in the morning, and we stopped at a gas station. Back then they called them filling stations because you would stop and they would clean your windshield, check your oil, check your tires and stuff like that, and gas you up. So, we stopped at this one filling station. I figure I was probably only nine or ten. And a boy who came out to wait on us, he was about the same age. My father, he got outside the car, and he was telling him what he wanted, to fill it up or whatever. And the little boy said, 'Is that all you need, boy?' ... That was my first encounter with something like that because up North you didn't hear that type of thing, but that has stayed with me all these years."<sup>20</sup>

Rural roadways presented particular challenges for African Americans who might be walking. On our journey through the state during Jim Crow, the car might pass people who were traveling on foot to work, church, or to visit a neighbor. For those vulnerable travelers, any passing car could mean harm. Potential menace was too capricious to predict, in the eyes of Henry Shepard.

"Once you got out of the neighborhood and got on a major highway that it would take to go someplace, of course, yeah, you were definitely in danger... During that time, we also knew that the law was not on your side. And your parents would tell you don't walk on the side of the road at night by yourself. Somebody going to throw a bottle out there and bust you in the head. And that's because that was happening. And if you reported it to the police department, then he would say, ah, they're just having a little fun. And that was it... And if you pushed it any further, you were told by your parents, you need to move to the North, some place and get away from around here before something bad happens to you... So, it was one of those things of realizing you have to maneuver these things because you don't have the same rights as everybody else."<sup>21</sup>

Jim Crow amounted to much more than avoiding proverbial roadblocks. It was a system with a purpose to permanently detour the rights and progress of African Americans. Kelley argues, "Segregation was not only a daily inconvenience and public humiliation but also part of a focused attack on the citizenship of all black southerners."<sup>22</sup>

## Visiting the Capital City

*Negro singer Nat (King) Cole and his wife... arrived in Raleigh late today.*

With African American citizenship challenged and thwarted by Jim Crow at every turn, any Black citizen could be attacked, no matter how rich, talented, or famous. Motorists may have



Raleigh, N.C. April 13 - 1956 Assoc. Press  
Courtesy Detroit Public Library

seen singer Nat King Cole and his stylish wife if they drove through downtown Raleigh on April 13, 1956. Passersby who caught a glimpse could have read newspaper accounts, with this Associated Press wire caption, recounting that three days before Cole arrived in Raleigh for a performance in Memorial Auditorium, he was attacked by white men while performing before an all-white audience in Alabama on April 10, 1956. The AP

news report from Raleigh reads: "Cole back on road. Negro

singer Nat (King) Cole and his wife are shown above as they arrived in Raleigh late today. Cole resumed a Southern tour interrupted Tuesday by an onstage attack by six white men in

Birmingham, Ala."<sup>23</sup> Because of its proximity to Memorial Auditorium, the Deluxe Hotel

attracted Cole and other African American celebrities. Janette Hodge is the daughter of Deluxe

Hotel owner Beadie Lucille Griswold Paige.

"My great, great aunt, Hattie Lewis was the original owner of the hotel and my mother and her two sisters attended Shaw University and helped around the hotel. She would often tell me about the different guests that they would have in particular Cab Calloway. He must have been a very delightful friendly type person and I think he would come to the hotel quite often when he came to perform. As you know, the hotel was sort of centrally located. You had the Memorial Auditorium just around the corner. When they would come to town that's where they would stay. Nat King Cole, I understand that he stayed there for about six weeks."<sup>24</sup>

Cole not only stayed in private homes and Black-owned hotels, he played to segregated audiences. Though he did not complete the show for white audiences in Birmingham after being attacked, the singer appeared for his show with Black ticket holders. Polished and debonair, Cole graces a September 27, 1952 Raleigh newspaper advertisement for what the paper and promoters called “The Biggest Show of 52.” The October 2 show featured Cole, Sarah Vaughan, and Stan Kenton. The ad touts how successful the tour had been in 1951 and 1950 but ends with instructions on how “Colored Patrons” should proceed to buy their tickets for segregated Memorial Auditorium in Raleigh.

“Tickets for the BIGGEST SHOW OF ’52 along with mail orders are being sold at THEIM’S RECORD SHOW in Raleigh. Colored patrons buy or send their mail order to HAMLIN DRUG CO., same as last year.”<sup>25</sup>

Nat King Cole and other famous celebrities were no strangers to North Carolina. They played in her theaters and on her stages, but to segregated crowds, either on separate nights or with African Americans seated in balconies or other defined spaces, distinctions which treated and marked them as “less than.” A traveler watching audiences enter Memorial Auditorium for the “Biggest Show of ‘52” would know that African Americans purchased tickets to see the inimitable Nat Cole, but they may not have realized the Black audience they observed never bought the message of inferiority.

The Deluxe Hotel, Lightner Arcade and other locations on Hargett Street provided shelter for crowds traveling to Raleigh’s Chavis Park, the largest park of its type between Washington, D.C. and Atlanta. The crack of the bat could be heard when Negro League baseball players hit the park, challenging the home team Raleigh Tigers. Travelers came from numerous states for the games and the park’s rides. Anyone driving by 520 South Bloodworth Street after a game, might see out-of-town motorists fueling up or having their radiators checked at Dunn’s Esso Station before the trip back home. Like all Americans, African Americans enjoyed and needed

social events and a support network found in their communities, but leisure pursuits were not a distraction from fighting Jim Crow.

### **Down the Road**

Traveling North Carolina roads during the Jim Crow era reveals a complicated life of triumphs and contradictions navigated by African Americans. Roads and rails leading to work, education, worship, and play meant moving toward goals while navigating harassment and personal harm on a daily basis. Every road presented known and unknown obstacles, but also the prospect of accomplishments and joys for African Americans traveling in North Carolina during the period of legal segregation in the American South. Jim Crow complicated their lives, but it did not stop African Americans from moving through North Carolina, building lives, seeking education, gathering to worship, and creating happiness where they could. They pressed forward even as laws prohibited their movements and established social norms that jeopardized their lives. With a backdrop of diverse locations from the coast to the piedmont, cities to hamlets, entertainers who made them proud, young college women who showed the promise of their people, and soldiers who upheld the best ideals, the responses to Jim Crow are clear. The sounds, sights, and signs along those roadways provide a map for understanding the African American experience and difficult roads in the state's past.

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- <sup>1</sup> “Seabreeze Beach: Southeastern North Carolina’s Pleasure Resort.” *The Carolinian*, August 12, 1950.
- <sup>2</sup> *The News Argus*, Winston-Salem, December 1, 1962.
- <sup>3</sup> Suttell, Brian William. “Countdown to Downtown: The Civil Rights Protest Movement in Downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina,” M.A. Thesis in History at North Carolina State University, 2007. <https://repository.lib.ncsu.edu/bitstream/handle/1840.16/2691/etd.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- <sup>4</sup> Jones, Sidney oral history interview OH030, interviewed by Lisa R. Withers, November 30, 2018 in Raleigh, N.C. African American Heritage Commission, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources.
- <sup>5</sup> Chafe, William, Raymond Gavins and Robert Korstand, editors. *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*. New York: The New Press, p. xxiv.
- <sup>6</sup> Kelley, Blair L.M. *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy vs. Ferguson*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010, p. 10.
- <sup>7</sup> “Seabreeze Beach: Southeastern North Carolina’s Pleasure Resort.” *The Carolinian*, August 12, 1950.
- <sup>8</sup> Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. "The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1950" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1950. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/283a7180-87c6-0132-13e6-58d385a7b928>, p. 63
- <sup>9</sup> Lofton, James oral history interview OH037, interviewed by Lisa R. Withers, April 16, 2019 in Wilmington, N.C. African American Heritage Commission, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources.
- <sup>10</sup> Campbell, W.D. “Atlantic Beach Scene of KKK Appearance.” *The Carolinian*, September 2, 1950. Digital NC, North Carolina Newspapers: <http://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn80008926/1950-09-02/ed-1/seq-1/>, p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. "The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1950" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1950. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/283a7180-87c6-0132-13e6-58d385a7b928>, p. 64
- <sup>12</sup> Gray, Antoinette Tonye oral history OH038, interviewed by Lisa R. Withers, April 17, 2019 in Wilmington N.C. African American Heritage Commission, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources.
- <sup>13</sup> “578<sup>th</sup> MPs Rescue Stricken Flood Victims,” *The Black Panther*, August 15, 1942 p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Kelley, p. 7.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, James Lofton.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, James Lofton.
- <sup>17</sup> “Bennett College Choir Thrills Service Audience.” *The Black Panther*, March 13, 1943.
- <sup>18</sup> Harris, Deborah oral history interview OH053, interviewed by Lisa R. Withers, July 19, 2019 in Fayetteville, N.C. African American Heritage Commission, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources.
- <sup>19</sup> “Cpl Holmes in ‘Native Son’ Forum and Discussion” *The Black Panther*, August 15, 1942 p. 1.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, Jones.
- <sup>21</sup> Shepard, Henry oral history interview OH023, interviewed by Lisa R. Withers, November 13, 2018 in Garner, N.C. N.C. African American Heritage Commission, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources.
- <sup>22</sup> Kelley, p. 10
- <sup>23</sup> “Nat King Cole” Associated Press, April 13, 1946. <https://digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A197340>
- <sup>24</sup> Janette Hodge oral history interview OH041, interviewed by Lisa R. Withers, May 4, 2019 in Charlotte. N.C. African American Heritage Commission, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources.
- <sup>25</sup> “The Biggest Show of ’52 to Play Raleigh Oct.2; Three Big Stars,” *The Carolinian*, September 27, 1952.